



**SIM Cards of Desire: Sexual Versatility and the Male  
Homoerotic Economy in Urban Congo**

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SIM Cards of Desire

Sexual versatility and the male homoerotic economy in urban Congo

*This article introduces the “homoerotic economy” as a set of interrelated erotic subject positions and emergent sexual identities, reproducing a gendered constellation of power and producing same-sex desire among men and boys in contemporary urban Congo (DRC). Based on ethnographic research in Kinshasa and Kisangani, it unpacks these erotic subject positions and their structuring dominant ideology of desire through a contextualized analysis of the emic “problem” of sexual versatility, thereby avoiding the shortcomings of a Euro-American “sexuality” framework. It particularly looks at how this “problem” is expressed through a language of cell phones and SIM cards, in order to think the fundamental ambiguity of male same-sex desire in urban Congo – (same-sex desire, homosexuality, erotic economy, gender dissidence, masculinity, Democratic Republic of Congo).*

Early March 2014 – an ordinary Saturday night outside *Airtel*, a crowded bar near a busy roundabout in *Lemba Super*, one of Kinshasa’s popular neighborhoods. I am talking to Prince<sup>1</sup>, a slender nineteen-year-old accounting student with whom I often hang out in town. I hadn’t seen him since my previous visit more than four months ago, although we had regularly chatted on Facebook<sup>2</sup>. I knew that he had recently broken up with his boyfriend, a twenty-four-year-old judoka, who used to visit him at least twice a week. Prince’s mother, stepfather and three sisters had always assumed that they were just good “friends” but, four weeks ago, one of his lover’s girlfriends had found out about their relationship and threatened to provoke a “scandal” at home. Prince was now telling me how he had been able to deal with this situation, using it to his own advantage as the perfect excuse to make an end to a relationship about which he was growing tired of anyway. Although his boyfriend was very handsome and a “true man” – a real *black*, as Prince would often say – their relationship had become too costly. While, during the last weeks

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3 before their breakup, Prince had given his lover a nice pair of sneakers, a fancy baseball cap, a  
4 watch and various sums of “transport money”, his boyfriend was still asking for more. Prince  
5 therefore decided to end the affaire. And, so he confessed with a wink, he also fell in love with an  
6 even better looking guy who was said to be very well endowed...  
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13 As we were watching the men and boys entering *Airtel*, Prince told me that he had recently left  
14 his stepfather’s house in the somewhat classier neighborhood around *Limete Place Commerciale* to  
15 move to his paternal grandmother’s place in *Lemba*. Too many of his friends were visiting him at  
16 home and this made his stepfather suspicious about his stepson’s activities. Despite Prince’s  
17 constant reminders to his friends to keep their “effeminacy” (Lingala: *lisamboli*) under control  
18 while his parents were around, their gender-nonconforming behavior attracted unwanted  
19 attention. Moving to his grandmother’s for a while – under the pretext to need a “quieter” place  
20 for studying – Prince had, for now, managed to escape his stepfather’s watch. But he also moved  
21 closer to his new object of desire. His new “future husband” was indeed regularly seen around  
22 *Airtel*, which had become one of the most popular bars in town for men and boys “in this world”  
23 (Li. *na monde oyo*) looking for dates and sex with other men and boys.  
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40 Situated next to the often-congested roundabout with its honking cars and agitated passengers  
41 trying to fetch transport to other parts of the city, *Airtel* attracts large crowds, especially on Friday  
42 and Saturday nights. Although in no way resembling a “gay” bar and – at first sight – remarkably  
43 similar to other bars in Kinshasa, *Airtel* has become the place-to-be where Prince and many of his  
44 friends gather. It has a large terrace bordering the street where people chat, drink their beers and  
45 sodas or watch the latest music clips projected on a large screen. The bar itself looks like a large  
46 banquet hall, filled with dancing guys and packed with men and boys who congregate on the  
47 first-floor balcony to have a prime view on the dance floor. Deejays mix Congolese (often  
48 *ndombolo*), African (usually *azonto* or *Naija* hits) and “international” (Rihanna or Stromae) music  
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3 and bartenders push themselves through the crowd while men and boys seductively dance with  
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5 each other or with one of the rare girls among them. Although same-sex dancing is nothing  
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7 unusual in Congolese nightclubs, the otherwise implicit homoeroticism of urban nightlife is here  
8  
9 rendered rather explicit. Self-consciously “effeminate” boys rhythmically twist their butts to the  
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11 approving eye of so-called “normal” men who willingly get carried away by *Airtel’s* licentious  
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13 atmosphere.  
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18 We take position opposite the alley leading to the toilets, from where Prince hopes to spot the  
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20 new guy he is so much in love with. Some of Prince’s friends come over and greet us. Prince  
21  
22 teases them by calling them *ndumba* (“free women” or “prostitutes”) while they call him *tantine*  
23  
24 (“auntie”) despite his young age. Prince shouts in my ear that many of his friends are *folles*  
25  
26 (“crazy”) and can therefore no longer visit him at home where he tries to keep a “low profile”  
27  
28 (*réglé*). Nearby, some tough-looking guys in baggy trousers are watching us. Prince’s friends loudly  
29  
30 comment on the physique of these so-called *bébés bouchous* (good-looking young masculine guys)  
31  
32 and strike explicitly provocative poses to attract their attention. One of Prince’s friends moves  
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34 forward to embrace his apparent favorite for the night and draws him to the dance floor. Prince  
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36 is getting nervous because his new love is nowhere to be seen. He also feels uncomfortable  
37  
38 because of the glances of an older man on the balcony above who tries to get his attention. “I  
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40 know this *papa*”, Prince tells me, “he used to date one of my friends who was fed up with the  
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42 younger *aventuriers*”. “But I don’t like this *pasha*. He has fucked all *fioto* [i.e. “effeminate” or  
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44 “passive” partners in male same-sex relationships] in town”.  
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51 In order to get some air and briefly escape from the increasingly sweaty crowd, I tell Prince that I  
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53 need to change some money on the street. When I come back, Prince is dancing with one of the  
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55 guys who had been looking at us and I am immediately taken aside by one of Prince’s *folle* friends  
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57 who must have seen me talking to a guy outside. He shouts in my ear: “Watch out for that man  
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3 outside, he is a hypocrite and takes it both sides [...] *he has a double SIM card*'. He drags me  
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5 towards the dance floor and I spend the rest of the night as I had spent so many others: dancing  
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7 (rather awkwardly I am afraid) with my *fioto* fieldwork participants "as a girl among girls",  
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9 negotiating the advances of "normal" looking men and boys, and gladly hiding behind the back  
10  
11 of Prince and others who had so warmly accepted my stumbling presence in their midst and who  
12  
13 were taking their mission to "show me how to behave as a real *fioto*" very seriously indeed.  
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22 The preceding ethnographic vignette contains a series of apparent identities and erotic labels –  
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24 *fioto, folle, régle, ndumba, aventurier, bébé boutchou, papa, pasha* – that are regularly used by men and  
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26 boys who, to different degrees and in different ways, look for sex and dates with other men and  
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28 boys, either to identify themselves or to describe and tease others. In this article, I argue that  
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30 many of these labels overlap with erotic subject positions and emergent sexual identities that  
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32 constitute what my informants and research participants call "this world" (of men who have sex  
33  
34 with men) and what I conceptualize as a *homoerotic economy* in contemporary urban DR Congo.  
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36 Ethnographic fieldwork in Kinshasa and Kisangani indeed suggests that this male homoerotic  
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38 economy is an inherent, albeit usually unspoken dimension of "normal" life<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, most  
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40 scholarly analyses of masculinity in the DR Congo render the implicit homoeroticism of everyday  
41  
42 city life invisible because they automatically take the "heterosexuality" of their subjects for  
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44 granted (Biaya 1996; Gandoulou 1989; Gondola 2013; Hollander 2014; Lwambo 2013; Pype  
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46 2007; Trapido 2011). This article argues that a fine-grained understanding of the complexities and  
47  
48 ambiguities of masculinity – and of the broader operation of the urban gender matrix – is  
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50 impossible without fully realizing the salience and foregrounding the dynamics of desire arising  
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52 between male-bodied individuals in urban Congo<sup>4</sup>.  
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This article does not, however, counterbalance the unspoken heteronormativity of Congo studies by describing and analyzing a supposedly opposite “homosexual” world lurking in the shadows of the city. On the contrary, the following ethnographic analysis of emic ideologies of desire and erotic identities illustrates how one needs to go beyond the Euro-American concept of “sexuality” and its implicit dualist understanding of heterosexuality/homosexuality, to capture the ambiguity and fluidity of desire in urban Congo. This article gradually unpacks the erotic relations between male subject positions and works towards a nuanced understanding of the dominant ideology of desire that structures the homoerotic economy. To understand the complexities of male same-sex desire and to reveal the shortcomings of a Euro-American “sexuality” framework, it specifically approaches the internal contradictions and instabilities of the homoerotic economy through the vernacular “problem” of *sexual versatility*. I particularly look at how erotic hybridity is expressed through a creative vocabulary of cell phones and SIM cards, which – when seen in its broader context – sheds new light on the nature of desire in contemporary urban Congo.

**Homophobia in urban Congo**

The previous evocation of open seduction between men and boys in a Kinshasa nightclub seems to contradict the image of African countries as “homophobic” spaces where supposed “homosexuals” have to live their lives behind closed doors or otherwise become victims of constant discrimination and violence. At the same time, however, Prince’s reminders to his friends to keep their “effeminacy” under control, and the threat of his lover’s girlfriend to “unmask” (*kobombola*) their friendship as an erotic relationship, indicate the limits and precariousness of public expressions of same-sex desire in contemporary urban Congo. Some general background information is therefore needed to fully appreciate the characteristic ambiguity of the homoerotic economy presented in this article.

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3 In comparison to some African countries where heavily mediatized discussions about  
4 “homosexuality” have recently marked national politics and produced new or intensified “anti-  
5 gay” legislation, the topic remains relatively absent from political debates in the Democratic  
6 Republic of Congo. Despite some minor unsuccessful attempts to criminalize “homosexuality”,  
7 the historical absence of legal prohibitions against same-sex practices indeed remains largely  
8 uncontested<sup>5</sup>. National politics seem to be relatively unaffected by the supposed rise of  
9 “homophobia” on the African continent about which international media often report. This does  
10 not, however, imply that Congolese politicians would be supportive of sexual minority rights or  
11 “accept” same-sex erotic practices and identities. The latter merely remain unspoken and largely  
12 untapped as resources for political rhetoric and mobilization.  
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27 Notwithstanding the relative absence of *state* homophobia in contemporary politics, Congolese  
28 realities are very much affected by *popular* homophobic discourses (Ludovic 2011), which inform  
29 widely shared negative attitudes and sometimes hostile reactions to individuals who are perceived  
30 to be gender non-conforming and/or sexually deviant. Moralizing public discussions about the  
31 life of so-called *pédés*<sup>6</sup> for instance periodically appear in national and regional media<sup>7</sup>. And,  
32 although such outbursts of moral indignation usually die out rather quickly, of one thing  
33 everybody seems to be absolutely sure: same-sex practices *are on the rise*. They are seen as an  
34 unavoidable aspect of hedonistic lifestyles and the immoral “temptations” of contemporary city  
35 life. From an analytic perspective, however, the question of whether or not such popular claims  
36 actually reflect “rising” frequencies of same-sex erotic practices in urban Congo is beside the  
37 point. What *is* clearly rising is the actual frequency of their being publically discussed.  
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53 This increasing urge to publically discuss so-called “homosexual” practices as the “latest fashion”  
54 (Reid 2003) needs to be understood from a broader popular perspective on today’s general “state  
55 of the world”. On the one hand, from the perspective of a profoundly religious urban imaginary,  
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the perceived “rise” in same-sex practices is read as a sign of the coming of the Apocalypse (Van Klinken 2013). The abomination of “homosexuality” is, in this view, an eschatological symptom marking the Apocalyptic interlude as a time when Satan’s influence on the world rises before Christ’s second coming will save true believers (De Boeck 2005). On the other hand, same-sex practices are also seen as “occult” techniques used to obtain power and wealth. Male so-called *pédés* are indeed supposed to belong to secret satanic sects practicing anal penetration to “steal” or “eat” the life force of other men or to maintain the functionality of a specific medicine (*nkisi*). Hence, in popular imaginations, homosexuals are not so much marginalized effeminate boys in the neighborhood as powerful politicians and businessmen whose wealth and success is explained by an occult economy of sodomy (e.g. Epprecht 2013; Sadgrove et al. 2012)<sup>8</sup>.

Although these public discourses, reading same-sex practices as an occult technique or as a sign of the End Times, are usually *general* moral commentaries on perceived social and political changes rather than direct accusations voiced at certain individuals, most Congolese men and boys who have sex with other men and boys nevertheless try to keep their practices and desires secret. Moreover, relatives, friends and colleagues rarely express suspicions or raise the topic of sexual dissidence in their presence. Hence, in spite of the increasing urge to publically discuss “homosexuality”, a certain silence often marks everyday personal life. The recent proliferation of public discourses about homosexuality seems to partly break up this conventional culture of silence while, at the same time, preserving this silence in everyday interactions. When discussed *in general terms*, supposedly “fashionable” same-sex erotic practices become objects of moral condemnation that can be openly expressed and thought about. But as soon as matters get personal – i.e. as soon as specific individuals seem to get involved – these moral discourses quickly retreat behind a conventional silence that usually prevents scandals from erupting.

**Male same-sex erotic practices**



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5 It has often been noted that conventional silence blocks the *discursive* expression of same-sex  
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7 desire but creates conditions in which same-sex erotic *acts* remain relatively un-problematized  
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9 (e.g. Epprecht 2004). Indeed, as long as they remain unspoken and do not threaten public status  
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11 and/or heterosexual marriage and procreation, same-sex erotic practices are not always seen as  
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13 problematic in themselves. Nevertheless, the recent proliferation of discourses about  
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15 “homosexuality” has, to a certain extent, problematized the unproblematic and unspoken. Or, at  
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17 the very least, it has rendered male homoerotic desire more “visible” to the selective eye of  
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19 society. But although everyday life thus poses real challenges for many same-sex loving men and  
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21 boys in Kinshasa and Kisangani, this heightened visibility of homoerotic desire also opens up  
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23 new opportunities. As some of them now boldly show their erotic dissidence, such visible  
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25 performances of same-sex erotic desire attract so much public attention that everyday life  
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27 continues rather easily in the shadows of these open demonstrations of queer desire. Moreover,  
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29 Congolese urban space is already saturated with expressions of bodily affection and intimacy  
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31 between men and boys (without them being experienced or perceived as manifestations of  
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33 “sexual” attraction) and thus provides fertile ground for the exploration of homoerotic desires.  
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35 Indeed, the public gaze seems to be so fascinated by *folle* performances that it barely lingers on  
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37 the homoerotic potential of ordinary city life.  
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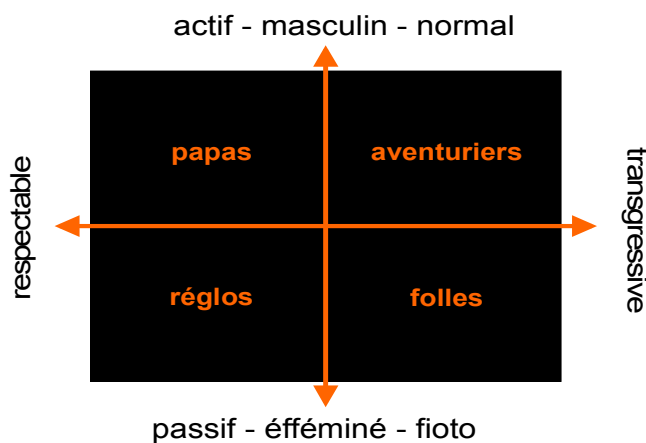
44 Fieldwork in Kinshasa and Kisangani thus suggests that same-sex erotic practices between men  
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46 and boys are quite common and perhaps less “problematic” than is often assumed. At the same  
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48 time, however, one should not underestimate the real difficulties sexually dissident men and boys  
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50 encounter. Because of the social stigma attached to same-sex practices – particularly, as we will  
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52 see, when one plays a “receptive” role – most men and boys who have sex with other men and  
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54 boys prefer to lead a “secret” life hidden from one’s family, neighbors and most of one’s friends.  
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56 Gender-nonconforming men and boys also run a considerable risk of police harassment or even  
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abuse and have to deal with the ever-lurking possibility of being blackmailed by discontented lovers, jealous friends or, more rarely, casual witnesses. Life therefore requires a permanent vigilance and carefully developed skills in order to know when one has to keep quiet (*koʒinda*; literally “to submerge”) and when one can “let oneself go” (*kolembisa*).

**A homoerotic economy**

Having sketched the general discursive and practical background of male same-sex erotic desire in contemporary urban Congo, let us now have a closer look at what my research participants refer to as *monde oyo* or “this world” of men and boys who have sex with other men and boys. Although, at first sight, this world seems to be very different from the “normal” world, it is actually experienced as an omnipresent dimension of “normal” life that is actualized in certain places and at certain times. Let us therefore conceptualize this emic “world” as a *homoerotic economy* that partly overlaps with, emerges from and actualizes an inherent potential of a supposedly “normal” erotic economy (made up of relations between so-called “normal” men and women) instead of framing it as a completely “different” world or isolated “subculture” embodied by sexually marginalized individuals. For the purpose of this article, we should understand the homoerotic economy as *a gendered constellation of power relations, which produces a dynamic set of interrelated erotic subject positions, erotic identities and vectors of desire between individual male bodies taking up these subject positions and constructing identities with different degrees of reflexivity*. In line with Henrietta Moore’s framework on gender (1994, 2007), these erotic subject positions should be considered as the (sometimes unexpected) *effects of interactions between discourses*, some of which do not deal with “gender” or “sexuality” in a straightforward way<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, by conceptualizing this “world” as an *economy*, we can highlight its structural characteristics as a *system of production, distribution and consumption of desire*, characterized by certain rules of value attribution that give rise to specific pathways of monetary circulation between embodied male subject positions.

Although it has been noted that so-called cultures of silence allow for sexual *acts* while preventing the formulation of sexual *identities*, ethnographic fieldwork in Kinshasa and Kisangani suggests that specifically labeled erotic identities *do* arise from erotic subject positions as side effects of social and cultural dynamics at work in contemporary urban culture. The specific terminology of these emergent erotic identities is not, however, widespread currency but often only known and used by people who move “in this world”. Let me propose the following structure as a way to explore the relations between these different erotic subject positions, which either are or are not expressed in language as erotic identities.



This schematic representation of the homoerotic economy in urban Congo illustrates how two intersecting emic axes of differentiation produce four erotic subject positions. The first axis introduces a distinction between so-called *actifs* and *passifs*, according to the position men supposedly assume during anal intercourse. This gendered axis of *penetration* reproduces a male/female binary within same-sex relationships and thus ideologically “heterosexualizes” same-sex desire as a desire arising between supposedly “masculine” and “effeminate” men (e.g. Gaudio

2009; Reid 2013). In urban Congo, the so-called receptive, penetrated or “passive” partners in same-sex relations generally identify as *fioto*, a relatively recent term that indicates their explicit *effeminate masculinity*<sup>10</sup>. Although they clearly consider themselves to be male (and are also perceived as male by others), their masculinity is profoundly affected by a supposedly innate or developed desire for being penetrated by so-called “real” men. Hence, they usually signal their erotic dissidence by public or private performances of femininity and assume a self-conscious effeminate masculinity.

Their boyfriends, on the other hand, do not define themselves (nor are they defined by others) as in any way different from other men. They are just “normal” men who – often notwithstanding their public relationships and erotic involvements with women and girls – happen to have a specific taste for having sex with other men and boys. Perhaps surprisingly, dating *fioto* men and boys not necessarily threatens their masculinity. On the contrary, in specific situations, it can even be a way to reconfirm one’s status as a “healthy” man. Because hegemonic masculinity often reproduces itself through displays and claims of sexual prowess, and because what from a Western perspective appears like “bisexuality” is merely the taken for granted default state of male erotic desire, adding a *fioto* date to a series of erotic encounters with women and girls, can indeed make rather than break one’s reputation as a man. But although these men do not seem to be any different from other (supposedly “heterosexual”) men, they do occupy a specific erotic subject position *because of their actual relations with fioto men and boys* – a subject position that does not, however, give rise to a specific erotic *identity* but remains implicit as a largely untapped site of potential identification within the homoerotic economy.

The second axis in the above scheme represents a further emic distinction between male erotic subject positions. Operating along the lines of *respectability*, it introduces a moral criterion that is widely used to judge the behavior and reputation of men and women in public life. On the lower

side of the scheme, this axis of reputation marks a distinction between so-called *réglos* and *folles*. While the former designate *fioto* men and boys who manage to keep their erotic identity within the boundaries of public respectability and are thus supposed to be unremarkable, the latter behave in literally “crazy” ways. In other words, *réglos* usually “hide” their effeminacy through fine-tuned practices of immersion in gender-normative crowds, while *folles* are publically visible in everyday city life and enjoy a perhaps surprising freedom to express their gendered and erotic difference, exactly *because* they “have no more reputation to lose”.

On the upper side of the scheme, this axis of reputation differentiates between men who seem to conform to the moral and social expectations of male adulthood, defined by responsibility and restraint, and guys who contest and transgress such gendered norms. Although these subject positions do not have unique names (and, indeed, often remain unnamed), the former are sometimes called *les papas* (stereotypically indicating big-bellied housefathers who often act as so-called sugar daddies) or *djo* or *pasha* (indicating their sexual prowess and self-confidence), while the latter are identified by a set of names that indicate their explicit transgression of housefather respectability (e.g. *aventuriers*, *gangsters*, *yankees*) or their relative age<sup>11</sup> (e.g. *jeunes*, *bébés boutchous*).

Both axes presented above are, in themselves, not specific to the homoerotic economy. They are actually more general logics of differentiation that, when applied to male same-sex desire and reproduced between male bodies, give rise to the fourfold emic homoerotic categorization. Note, however, that they do not operate in similar ways. The axis of penetration introduces a gendered ideology that produces a strictly binary division between “normal” men and effeminate *fioto*. Ideologically speaking, one is thus supposed to belong to *either* the upper *or* the lower half of the scheme. As we will see below, hybrid bodies and subjectivities that simultaneously belong to *both* halves are, therefore, seen as a “problem”. The axis of respectability, on the other hand, does not introduce a strict binary division but a gradient along which one occupies more or less situational

positions rather than “fixed” identities. Although people tend to label others as belonging to either the left-hand or the right-hand side of the scheme, in practice one constantly moves along a gradient of respectability, often depending on the spaces one finds oneself in. This gradient also reflects the aforementioned co-occurrence of, on the one hand, a conventional culture of silence and, on the other hand, a proliferation of public discourses on same-sex desire: the left-hand side of the scheme comprises subject positions (*réglos* and *papas*) that usually remain – and whose occupants do their very best to remain – unnoticed, while those on the right-hand side (*folles* and *aventuriers*) are easily noticeable to the eye of society and therefore subjected to the proliferating public discourses on sexual and gender dissidence.

Although this article is mainly concerned with the specific implications of the axis of penetration, it is important to mention that the second axis of respectability and transgression is an equally salient one and even contains an ambiguous but productive contradiction underlying contemporary urban Congolese culture. While the first axis introduces a binary division of *gender*, the second axis seems to account for an internal *generational* dynamics at work in the homoerotic economy. As people grow older, they are indeed supposed to move from the right-hand side to the left-hand side of the scheme. However, notwithstanding this apparent generational push, older men often claim to be still transgressive youngsters “deep down”. From an analytic perspective one should understand such frequent claims as a sign of how postcolonial political and economic changes and new sociocultural dynamics have profoundly altered the game of masculinity over the past decades. Hegemonic masculinity indeed seems to shift from the respectable *papa* on the left to the urban *aventurier* on the right, who turns his transgressive behavior into a badge of honor and claims to be forever young<sup>12</sup>. In a similar way, many *réglos* admit that, whenever they find themselves in secure environments, they expose themselves as even crazier than the *folles* from whom they openly distance themselves. This contemporary importance of transgression in the performance of masculinity profoundly resonates with

Congo's self-proclaimed urban ideology of *ambiance* (Biaya 1996) and mainly manifests itself in its paradigmatic space, the "bar" or *nganda*. It is, indeed, no coincidence that *aventuriers* and *folles* are often explicitly linked to this *ambiance*, a permissive nation-wide atmosphere of music, dancing and beer, which – depending on one's moral discourse and audience – is either the country's pride or shame.

### Connecting to "this world"

Although the schematic representation of the homoerotic economy given above inevitably simplifies a less neat erotic reality, it nevertheless provides a heuristic structure to understand the dynamics of desire between different male erotic subject positions. To further unpack these subject positions, we need to return to the everyday narratives and understandings of my research participants, who often voice their sense of belonging to this homoerotic economy through the expression *naʒa branché*, which literally means, "I am connected". In so far as this claim of connection is made by both *fioto* men and boys and their so-called "normal" boyfriends and lovers, they seem to express a connection to the same *monde oyo*<sup>13</sup> as a world of men who have sex with men. Many so-called "normal" guys often show off their same-sex erotic experiences to one another by literally mentioning how *branché* they are. *Fioto* men and boys, on the other hand, regularly boast about the number of potential partners they know in the city or about their knowledge of places where one can go for quick sexual encounters. *Naʒa branché* thus refers to a common sphere of social interactions and erotic encounters, partly overlapping with the public space of the *nganda* but equally comprising secret meeting places, hotel rooms and private apartments. In this sense, people who are *branché* claim to be connected to a largely invisible network of others who are also "in the know" and who thereby occupy different subject positions in the homoerotic economy<sup>14</sup>.

Moreover, as a claim of connection to a “world”, *naza branché* equally positions the person making that claim as a kind of capturing device searching for and connecting to a “network”. This is literally illustrated when fieldwork participants explicitly talk about themselves as “antennas” or “phones” connecting to a *réseau*. In Kinshasa and Kisangani, general comments about telephone networks are very common. Because of their notorious instability and unreliability, the state of phone networks is indeed always a matter of popular concern. Not unlike, for instance, West-Europeans obsessively commenting on and predicting changes in the weather, *kinois* and *boyomais* often discuss the state of the “network”. Although different phone companies cover Congolese cities and many rural areas, these networks are often disrupted (*réseau eza te*) or severely disturbed (*eza ya mobulu*). As a result, mobile phones continuously have to search for networks and calls often need to be interrupted. In such a context, the French verb *brancher* denotes not so much a *passive plugging into* as an *active capturing of* a wider network that reaches beyond one’s immediate life world. Connecting thus requires labor, investments and continuous effort. It requires specific skills, capacities and resources. In the popular imagination (and in their own self-representations), *fioto* men and their “normal” boyfriends often act as “experts” in connection who know how to capture and safeguard a network<sup>15</sup>.

This link between sexual and gender transgression and “connecting to a network” continuously emerges during fieldwork. The ethnographic vignette given above, for instance, literally illustrates this connection. It is no coincidence that the name of the club *Airtel* in Lemba, one of the most popular bars among *fioto* men and their boyfriends in Kinshasa, poignantly recycles the name of one of the main telephone providers in the country. The same link also appears, for example, in rumors about telephone companies and their employees. Under current economic conditions, where salaried work is frustratingly rare and where working in telecommunication is highly desired, it is often whispered that companies like *Vodacom* are run by notorious *pédés* who supposedly require job applicants “to drop their pants” and who “initiate” new employees into



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3 their (often occult) erotic practices. The same talk about “networking” and capturing “networks”  
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5 also emerges, for instance, in discussions about closed Facebook groups<sup>16</sup> for men “in this  
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7 world”, which are usually accessed on smart phones. And such mobile phones are themselves,  
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9 for course, also clear signs of connectivity and hence a coveted commodity and recurrent gift  
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11 circulating through the homoerotic economy, used for sending prepaid phone credit between  
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13 lovers and highly elaborate love messages by SMS, which are often eagerly copied and resend  
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15 throughout the “network”.  
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20 It should, however, be noted that this recurrent talk about capturing “networks” that are often  
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22 inaccessible to the larger population equally reconfirms popular convictions that so-called *pédés*  
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24 operate in occult global networks, Rosicrucian secret societies and other supposedly Satanist  
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26 homosexual “sects” controlling the world. Because they are supposedly able to capture hidden  
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28 networks that are very remunerative for the “initiated” but inaccessible to outsiders, *fioto* men  
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30 (and, to a lesser extent, their “normal” boyfriends) are often automatically supposed to operate in  
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32 the so-called “second world” (*deuxième monde*) of witchcraft (*kindoki*)<sup>17</sup>. It is indeed no coincidence  
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34 that the same technological language of phones, antennas and satellite dishes, used by *fioto* men  
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36 and their “normal” boyfriends to refer to themselves, is equally used to talk about practices of  
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38 witchcraft occurring in *monde wana*, “that world” (De Boeck 2000).  
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#### 44 A dual world

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48 Because the possible occult connotations of these claims of being *branché* need to be seen in the  
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50 context of the ambivalence of transgression hinted at before – and, thus, in the light of the  
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52 second axis of differentiation in the homoerotic economy, which largely falls beyond the scope of  
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54 this article – let us now return to the first axis of differentiation and have another look at the  
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56 characteristics of the “network” or “world” to which the recurrent claims of connection refer. I  
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3 have already indicated that this world denotes a distinct sphere that is both different from the  
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5 “normal” world *and* an inherent part of it. As such, it refers to an immanent queer dimension of  
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7 everyday life that is potentially accessible to everyone as a homoerotic plane of existence  
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9 fundamentally entangled with the broader urban economy of sex, gender and desire. On a closer  
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11 inspection, however, this “one” homoerotic world or network really seems to be a *double* world  
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13 split in two symmetrical halves, corresponding to the upper and lower part of the scheme  
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15 presented above. Indeed, the first axis of differentiation – i.e. the directionality of penetration – is  
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17 such a salient and fundamental feature of the homoerotic economy that it cuts this “world” in  
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19 two: a *fioto* or passive world and a “normal” or active one.  
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25 Indeed, in practice, men and boys belonging to these different halves interact less often as one  
26  
27 might expect. They usually hang out with friends who occupy the same gendered subject position  
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29 and amongst whom erotic attraction is thus supposedly impossible. The axis of penetration and  
30  
31 its ideological reproduction of a male/female binary effectively “heterosexualizes” same-sex  
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33 desire and thereby renders, for instance, erotic frisson between *fioto* men and boys practically  
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35 unthinkable. As soon as the slightest hint of intra-*fioto* attraction emerges, most *fioto* men and  
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37 boys usually respond with a firm refusal, loudly claiming that they “are not lesbians”<sup>18</sup>.  
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39 Interactions *between* both halves, on the other hand, are immediately eroticized but usually remain  
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41 limited to bars, bedrooms and secret dating places and thus constitute a relatively constricted  
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43 aspect of everyday life. This everyday erotic segregation between both halves of the erotic  
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45 economy is, moreover, not only seen as “natural” but also as something that should be protected.  
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47 For instance, a *fioto*-only Facebook group (*les passifs du Congo*) has been created in order to provide  
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49 a virtual communication space where *fioto* topics can be discussed, unencumbered by the  
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51 intrusion of “normal” guys looking for dates (and by the inevitable jealousies these provoke  
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53 within the on-line *fioto* community).  
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The emic erotic difference between *passifs* and *actifs* also clearly emerges in discussions that frequently erupt between *fioto* men and boys about the supposed problem of what, from a Euro-American perspective, might be called “sexual versatility”. These discussions are a logical consequence of the strictly binary separation inherent to the above scheme, in so far as they raise the specter of hybridity as the logical conundrum of dualist thinking. The problem posed by the emic conceptualization of same-sex desire in a strictly binary erotic economy indeed deals with the position of men and boys who are *at the same time* “normal” and *fioto*, simultaneously (or successively) *actif* and *passif*. Although their position is explicitly denied by the hegemonic organization of gender and desire, everyday reality shows that versatile experiences are far more common than is often assumed. However, in contrast to many Western contexts where sexual versatility is somehow considered to be a natural aspect of “gay” identities, sexual hybridity usually has profoundly negative connotations in urban Congo. A closer ethnographic analysis of this emic “problem” of sexual hybridity will shed further light on the complexities of the homoerotic economy evoked above.

### Sexual versatility

The “problematic” nature of sexual versatility is articulated by a particular expression that was already mentioned in the opening vignette to this article and that takes us back to the language of phones and networks introduced above. Men and boys who are supposed to belong to both sides of the erotic divide of penetration are often said to be *na double SIM*: they literally “have a double SIM card”<sup>19</sup>. This recurrent expression among *fioto* men and boys – and, albeit to a lesser extent, among their “normal” boyfriends – strikingly captures the difficult issue of sexual versatility.

To be (accused of being) *na double SIM* refers to the omnipresent dual SIM<sup>20</sup> mobile phones that allow one to capture two networks at the same time. By explicitly claiming that sexually

versatile individuals have a double SIM card, people thus highlight the fact that these persons are both here and there, capturing both a *fioto* network and a “normal” network, occupying a hybrid position within a binary homoerotic economy. But the expression also directly refers to the inherently problematic nature of this hybrid erotic position. Indeed, although dual SIM phones are quite popular in Kinshasa and Kisangani because they enable one to capture another network in cases of interruption and perturbation, they are invariably supposed to break down rather quickly. The possibility to introduce two SIM cards in one phone is thereby read as a sure sign of forgery and dual SIM phones are invariably assumed to be counterfeit (*piraté*) devices expected to frequently disappoint their users. In a similar way, people who “have a double SIM card” are supposed to be unreliable and untrustworthy: because you never know what side they are on, they can always turn against you. Like the Chinese cell phones, they are seen as phony persons, fake imitations who might pretend to be real men but secretly desire to be penetrated by other men<sup>21</sup>. For most *fioto* men and boys, such “hypocrite” individuals are therefore automatically second-rate lovers: the mere idea of them ending up in bed with other men undermines their masculinity and thus nips erotic desire in the bud. As a result, boyfriends who do not meet the high performative standards required by their *fioto* lovers typically run a risk of being accused of having a double SIM card and thus of not being “real” men but hypocrites who like to “give their ass” to others.

This widespread understanding of sexual versatility is of fundamental importance for our analysis because it further reveals the complexity of the homoerotic economy sketched above. Note, for a start, that this form of unstable double belonging does *not* refer to individuals who have sex with men and women. The double SIM card accusation is not provoked by the realization that a certain individual desires both men and women but rather by suspicions that he likes to penetrate *and to be penetrated*, that is, to switch roles between inserter and inserted. What, from a Western perspective, one might label “bisexuality” is indeed not problematic at all but often very much

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3 taken for granted. On the upper half of the homoerotic economy, “normal” men are invariably  
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5 supposed to be attracted to women and girls, besides their desire for *fioto* men and boys<sup>22</sup>. And,  
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7 perhaps more surprisingly, even many *fioto* men and boys are also supposed to be “bisexual” in  
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9 practice. At several occasions, the latter indeed have sex with women and girls, although the  
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11 actual presence of erotic desire between them is a much-contested issue. *Fioto* men and boys  
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13 themselves, for their part, often attribute sexual intimacy with women and girls to a desire to  
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15 conform to family pressures and to produce offspring rather than to erotic arousal itself.  
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20 But although *fioto* individuals thus sometimes switch between a penetrator position (with women  
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22 and girls) and a penetrated position (with men and boys), this does not redefine their erotic  
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24 subject position to a sexually hybrid one. There is, indeed, a profound asymmetry in the  
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26 accusations voiced against individuals who are supposed to have a double SIM card: they are  
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28 generally seen as *fioto* who “deny” or “repress” their desire to be penetrated and *pose* as “normal”  
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30 men *rather than the other way round* (i.e. real men who pretend to be *fioto*). As a result, *fioto* men and  
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32 boys who occasionally have sex with women and girls are not accused of having a double SIM  
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34 card because their (masculine) capacity for penetration does not contradict their supposedly  
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36 (feminine) desire for being penetrated by “real” men. In other words, what really matters, and  
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38 thus needs to be explained and accounted for, is *fioto* desire (i.e. a male desire to be penetrated by  
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40 men). It is the supposed absence or presence of *this* desire that appoints individual men to the  
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42 emic categories of *fioto* or “normal”. The very fact that sexual versatility is explained as an *unstable*  
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44 erotic state that, almost inevitably, falls back towards a *fioto* erotic identity rather than to a  
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46 “normal” male position makes clear the overruling power of *fioto* desire over “normal” desire. A  
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48 fundamental asymmetry thus reveals itself in the aforementioned homoerotic economy: while it is  
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50 always possible for a *fioto* to take up a penetrating position (an act that in no way contradicts his  
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52 desire to be penetrated) because he is still a “man”, it is – ideologically speaking at least –  
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impossible for a “normal” man to experience or express a desire to *be* penetrated as that would immediately redefine him as *fioto* – albeit perhaps a closeted one.

Why exactly is it only *fioto* desire that needs to be explained and accounted for, while “normal” desires usually remain unspoken and taken for granted? So-called male “passive” desire for penetration seems to pose a fundamental problem to hegemonic masculinity because it shatters the corporeal integrity of the autonomous male ego. It indeed contradicts the phallic autonomy of male desire by revealing a supposedly “feminine” urge pushing *fioto* men and boys to “give themselves” to their “normal” lovers<sup>23</sup>. But although *fioto* men and boys are thus considered to be essentially “feminine” or woman-like – hence their performances of *effeminate* masculinity – they are *not* women. Indeed, unlike women, who are (at least from a male patriarchal perspective) assumed to be “without desire”, *fioto* are generally supposed to be “addicted to sex” and *fioto* desire is essentially understood as a desire-out-of-control. Their supposedly insatiable hunger to be penetrated by real men undermines the phallic ideology of desire and brings into the open what a patriarchal gender matrix pushes so hard to forget: the very fact that women are no mere objects and receptacles for male desire but actively desiring subjects themselves. *Fioto* desire thereby directly plays into male fears of female desire as a dangerous and voracious force that needs to be contained in decent women but finds a free course in *fioto* men and boys, who are thus often identified as male-bodied “free women” or “prostitutes” (*ndumba*).

**SIM cards of desire**

The emic conceptualization of sexual versatility as a possession of a double SIM card thus confirms the widespread understanding of the homoerotic economy as an inherently *double* world. Some people, so it is said, possess one SIM card to capture a “normal”/male world and another one to capture a *fioto*/female world. The first SIM card is thereby supposed to account for *fioto*

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desire while the latter accounts for “normal” desire<sup>24</sup>. Both SIM cards thus represent profoundly different forms of desire as hardwired bodily potentials for yearning of which only one needs to be explicitly accounted for because of its queer(ing) implications. So-called “normal” men, even when they almost exclusively build relationships within the homoerotic economy, contain a “normal” SIM card (capturing a *fioto*/female world) that is in no way different from the SIM cards possessed by men who happen to find themselves (also) outside the homoerotic economy. On the other hand, however, *fioto* men and boys possess an apparently “female” SIM card (capturing a “normal”/male world) that explains their desire for being penetrated<sup>25</sup>. From such a perspective, SIM cards of desire explicitly illustrate the profoundly *gendered* dynamics of the homoerotic economy, in which desire appears more as a product of *gender* than of “sexuality”.

Nevertheless, at the same time, these homoerotic dynamics of desire are more than mere tricks of gender. I have already mentioned how *fioto* men are neither “normal” men nor just women in disguise. As self-consciously effeminate men who, to different degrees, show their erotic difference to others by performing a hyper-femininity, which supposedly signals their always inherently excessive and voracious desires, they occupy a distinct sexual subject position and claim a distinct erotic identity, which, although clearly gendered, is not *a* (third) gender. So, although, from a certain perspective, they indeed possess a “female” SIM card of desire, *fioto* men and boys are *not* women; and neither are they a different gender. They are men who construct a specific erotic identity on the basis of a dissident elaboration of possibilities of desire theoretically present in every male. To put it in the language of phones and SIM cards: their phone is male-bodied but their SIM card actualizes a feminine potential of that male body, centered on the “passive” pleasures of anal intercourse.

One can also grasp how the homoerotic economy is more than an effect of gender by having a closer look at the supposedly “normal” men who find themselves in intimate relations with *fioto*

men and boys. Their position is indeed not as unproblematic as it might seem from the perspective of the dominant gender ideology operating within the homoerotic economy. These men (and their *fioto* boyfriends) invest a lot of time and energy in repeating that their “normal” desires are indeed “normal” and thus in no way different from men who almost exclusively have sex with women and girls. Nevertheless, these so-called “normal” men occupy an extant but often unspoken erotic subject position that still somehow differentiates them from other men. Most people would, for instance, agree that dating a *fioto* man or boy is not the same thing as dating a woman or a girl. Their continuous entanglement in a homoerotic economy and their erotic interactions with *fioto* men and boys almost dialectically suggest an at least implicit erotic point of identification; not necessarily as a stable identity but rather as an always lurking possibility.

This potential but usually untapped difference between “normal” men (only) dating women and “normal” men (also) dating *fioto* clearly reveals itself when people reflect on the reversed dynamics of desire within male same-sex relationships. Ideologically speaking, desire is always already gendered as an inherently male phallic desire oriented towards a female passive object and receptacle. As stated above, this is the main reason why enjoying anal penetration *as a man* is a contradiction in terms that immediately re-qualifies a male individual as *fioto*. It is, however, clear that the desires generated by the dualist scheme of the homoerotic economy do not obey this phallic directionality. Fieldwork shows that it is usually not the “normal” man who desires the *fioto* but the latter who desperately desires the former and tries to seduce him by performing a certain femininity and overloading him with gifts and money. It is thus the *fioto* who takes the initiative and feels the need to “convince” his object of desire – who is, although always (more or less easily) convincible, not *a priori* convinced. *Fioto* seduction thus directly contradicts the phallic nature of desire and re-introduces the possibility of female desire in an otherwise phallic economy.



As a direct result of this “reversed” dynamics of desire, the position of so-called “normal” men equally contradicts the hegemonic conceptualization of desire as always inherently directed from male to female. As passive objects of *fioto* desire rather than actively desiring subjects themselves, their position profoundly differs from that of “normal” men desiring women. In so far as they accept this position as *objects* of desire, “normal” men indeed seem to let go their supposedly “active” phallic nature<sup>26</sup>. Nevertheless, this relative forsaking of sexual “activity” does not automatically imply undermining one’s masculinity. Perhaps surprisingly, in contemporary urban Congo, where attaining male status as a providing housefather or a notorious womanizer has become increasingly difficult for many men and boys (because of numerous economic obstacles), the explicit performance of masculinity as a prized *object* of (female and *fioto*) desire can paradoxically save and recursively reconfirm “normal” masculinity. In other words, given the on-going changes within the urban gender matrix, the explicit *objectification* of masculinity can boost its value as it participates in what appears as a cult of the male body (Pype 2007). This hyperinflation of masculinity, as a process in which masculinity becomes a rarefied object of desire for both men and women, thereby produces a “reversed” dynamics of desire within the homoerotic economy.

This reversed dynamics of desire also expresses itself in what can be called the *reversed transactionality* of sex in male same-sex relationships. Indeed, the “transactionality” of sex (Hunter 2002) – i.e. the commonly accepted exchange of sex for gifts and money – is usually a sign of the *sérieux* of love for many *fioto* men and their boyfriends. But in comparison to relationships between men and women, the homoerotic economy reverses the direction of this transactionality. While it is taken for granted gifts and money flow from men to women, the dynamics between male erotic subject positions pushes effeminate *fioto* to offer gifts and money to their “normal” boyfriends. Such a reversed transactionality has been noted in many other contexts (e.g. Gaudio

2009, Kulick 1998, Reid 2013) and is often seen as a consequence of the relatively marginal position of effeminate, passive partners in same-sex relationships who have to provide their “normal” lovers with material incentives to persuade them to settle for same-sex relationships.

This active persuasion of “normal” guys by *fioto* men and boys through gifts and money is a salient aspect of the homoerotic economy and redefines the very “activity” of supposedly “normal” men. What is more, from the moment such a “normal” man, as a “passive” object of *fioto* desire, expresses an “active” desire for an (albeit effeminate) *fioto* body – i.e. a “normal” phallic desire in other contexts – his masculinity becomes somewhat suspect. From the very moment *mutual* desire arises between a “normal” man and his *fioto* boyfriend, a haunting possibility opens up of accusing the former of having a double SIM card and, thus, of secretly being *fioto* himself. This emic ontology of gendered desire accounts for the often-stated impossibility of finding “true” same-sex love. From a *fioto* perspective, the ideal object of desire is indeed by definition a non-responding one, a “real” man who needs to be tricked and seduced into intimate relations but who can never express desire himself (apart from the most basic form of sexual satisfaction). Overeager sexual responsiveness inevitably disqualifies men as objects of desire: “real” men have to be hard to get.

All this suggests that the “normal” boyfriends of *fioto* men and boys share an ambiguous erotic subject position that offers an at least implicit possibility of specific erotic identification. They either need to pose as hard to get and non-responding “passive” objects of desire or navigate the always-lurking possibilities of emasculation when expressing their supposedly innate “active” desires with another male-bodied person. No matter what option they take and however hard they try to reconfirm the phallic nature of male desire, their entanglement in the homoerotic economy always queers their apparently “normal” SIM card of desire.

## Conclusion

The homoerotic economy presented in this article, as a set of four interrelated erotic subject positions and emergent erotic identities produced by two axes of differentiation, offers a heuristic structure to understand the dynamics of desire between male-bodied individuals in contemporary urban Congo. Although it inevitably simplifies a less neat erotic reality, the suggested fourfold schematic representation captures a dominant emic ideology of desire and contains a productive contradiction of transgression that accounts for the homoerotic potential of everyday life and the perhaps surprisingly visible manifestations of male-male desire within Congo's urban *ambiance*. As suggested in this article, the homoerotic economy is both a complex desire-producing system and an attempt at erotic classification. It accounts for how, given many socioeconomic changes and their implications for the reproduction of and shifts in hegemonic masculinity, new male erotic subject positions emerge and erotic identities crystalize out of urban dynamics of desire between male-bodied individuals. The other way around, it also accounts for how gendered dynamics between these erotic subject positions and identities at their turn produce homoerotic desires.

This article shows how, in its classificatory guise, the homoerotic economy thus tries to answer questions of erotic/sexual *difference* and *similarity* by producing a gendered ideology of sexual belonging that operates along a differentiating axis of penetration and results in a binary distinction between *foto* and "normal" men. It thus assumes and creates two erotic communities of belonging, two "worlds" or "networks" that constitute one male homoerotic economy, which is intimately entangled with the broader economy of desire, given the fact that supposedly "normal" men people one of its moieties. A contextualized analysis of the emic problem of sexual "versatility" – as the inherent threat of hybridity contained within the binary logic of erotic classification – enables one to ethnographically understand the production of homoerotic desire without resorting to a Euro-American "sexuality" framework, which – because of its

homosexual/heterosexual divide – would suggests “bisexuality” rather than sexual versatility as its hybrid problem. By carefully investigating the meaning and salience of vernacular expressions of desire in the technological language of cell phones and SIM cards, the complexity and ambiguity of same-sex desire can thus be approached beyond the rather fixating assumptions of sexuality as sexual orientation.

The final section of this article however illustrates that this homoerotic economy is always, to a certain extent, a *failing* attempt at erotic classification. Indeed, as a binary structure of erotic belonging, it is particularly unstable not only because it operates on the basis of a negation of sexual versatility as a lived reality but also because it is traversed by two internal contradictions. First, supposedly “active” men who (almost narcissistically) enjoy their position as passive objects of desire inevitably undermine the phallic directionality of desire that undergirds the binary homoerotic structure itself. Second, and from the opposite direction, the active hyper-sexuality of supposedly “passive” *fioto* men and boys equally destabilizes the male privilege on sexual activity, initiative and autonomy. Sexual “activity” and “passivity” are therefore particularly ambiguous and unstable markers of erotic difference and similarity. A careful ethnographic exploration of this very ambiguity contained within the homoerotic economy in contemporary urban Congo illustrates how the latter is always more than the mere reproduction of a gendered male/female binary within male same-sex relations, without therefore being simply another manifestation of “homosexuality”.

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For Review Only



<sup>1</sup> Names used in this article are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> This study is part of an on-going research project on male same-sex desire in urban Congo, funded by a KU Leuven University BOF research grant (2013-2014) and a FWO postdoctoral research grant (2014-2017). At the time of writing, six months of intensive postdoctoral fieldwork have been undertaken (four months in Kisangani and two in Kinshasa).

<sup>3</sup> Kinshasa and Kisangani provide two very different ethnographic realities. With a population of (officially) over nine million inhabitants, Kinshasa is a mega-city where gender-nonconforming men are quite visible in everyday life and where same-sex desires can be openly expressed, as long as they remain out of sight of one's family and as long as one is willing to bear social stigma. Kisangani, on the other hand, with a population of over 800.000 people, offers fewer opportunities for escaping the family gaze. Nevertheless, in contrast to the expectations of many of my research participants in Kinshasa, Kisangani is as fertile a research site as any other to explore the dynamics of male same-sex desire in contemporary Congo. The similarities and differences between both cities continuously inform my analysis and bring to the fore less straightforward aspects of each other's homoerotic economies.

<sup>4</sup> While same-sex practices and identities have recently received some scholarly attention in countries such as Uganda or Cameroun (e.g. Awondo et al. 2012; Guéboguo 2006; Ndjio 2012; Nyanzi 2013), in the DRC their salience is still overwhelmingly ignored.

<sup>5</sup> At the end of 2013, an opposition Member of Parliament introduced a bill to criminalize homosexual activities (alongside other forms of "immoral" sexual behavior) but it seems unlikely that this bill will be actually discussed in parliament.

<sup>6</sup> The pejorative French term *pédé* is commonly used to label men who have sex with men.

<sup>7</sup> "Homosexuality" is, for instance, publically debated on television and radio programs to which spectators and listeners can participate by calling in or sending text messages. Although

dissenting opinions are sometimes expressed, such mediatized debates are usually dominated by profound moral objections to same-sex erotic practices.

<sup>8</sup> Such discourses are therefore not so much expressions of a supposedly “African homophobia” as vernacular critiques of the opportunistic abuse of power by postcolonial elites (Awondo et al. 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Henrietta Moore (1994, 2007) argues that the act of taking up one or more of these erotic subject positions creates one’s gendered subjectivity. Fieldwork in urban Congo, however, suggests that while it is certainly possible to occupy several erotic subject positions (successively in one day or over a lifetime), this positioning is not always a conscious act (even less a voluntary choice) and is often more rigid and less flexible than Moore suggests.

<sup>10</sup> The Lingala word *fioto* seems to be derived from the French pejorative *fiotte* (“sissy”). It also resonates with *fiotifioti*, the young girls who dance in the video clips and concerts of many Congolese musicians. Although it is a term that is mainly used by *fioto* men and their “normal” boyfriends and is not known by most inhabitants in Kinshasa and Kisangani, it is increasingly appropriated by female sex workers and fashionable youth “in the know”.

<sup>11</sup> Note that the social category of “youngster” contains men until far in their thirties. Although the demarcation between *jeune* and *papa* overlaps with marriage and procreation, several men keep identifying as *jeune* long after they marry and/or have children.

<sup>12</sup> Note that this distinction between “respectable” and “transgressive” subject positions also appears to contain a class aspect. Fieldwork, however, shows that publically visible erotic transgressivity is *not* an index of lower socioeconomic status. Moreover, the concept of class seems ill suited to understand emic notions of distinction because the transgressive aspect of Congolese *ambiance* often brings together rather than separates men and boys from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

<sup>13</sup> Note that *monde oyo* is normally used by insiders to refer to their world (e.g. *monde oyo eza na mobulu*; “this world is full of trouble”). Outsiders, on the other hand, do not use the deictic demonstrative *oyo* (“this”) but usually refer to the same world as *monde wana*, meaning “that world”, implying “that world to which I do not belong” (e.g. *tika monde wana*; “leave that world behind”). Note, moreover, that the Lingala word for “world” (*mokili*) is only very rarely used in this context and that people generally prefer the French word *monde*.

<sup>14</sup> The frequently heard expression *naʒa branché* also has a more general meaning. It not only refers to a “local” network of people and places but also to a world *out there* that surpasses the homoerotic economy. As James Ferguson (2002) has argued in a more general context, *naʒa branché* thereby expresses a claim of membership in a wider global society. Although it falls outside the scope of this paper, it should be noted that *fioto* men and their boyfriends mobilize these cosmopolitan connotations when they make their claims of connection (e.g. by reframing their dissident sexual practices and erotic identities as capturing a global “modernity” that transcends “custom” and “tradition”).

<sup>15</sup> This can be taken quite literary. *Fioto* men and boys often come to a conception of their erotic “identity” by connecting to flows of images, texts and narratives on the worldwide web through smart phones and computers. Becoming *fioto* – or “learning” to behave like a true *fioto* – is thus a very mediated process connecting to a world out there, beyond family and kinship (Boellstorff 2005). This process usually starts on an individual level but often leads to forms of community building with other *fioto*, amongst whom the (always contested) interpretation of images, texts and narratives found on the Internet constitutes an everyday and shared activity (e.g. McAllister 2013; Tamale 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Groups such as “Gay men of Democratic Republic of Congo”, “Gais des Grands Lacs”, “Gay love in Kinshasa” or “Gay Malebo”.

<sup>17</sup> This popular link between same-sex practices and occult networks expresses a general moral disapproval of the erotic practices of sexually and gender dissident men and boys. It gives voice to a vernacular critique on the supposedly “fallen” state of the world and operates within a broader moralizing attack on Congolese *ambiance* from the stance of church and family.

<sup>18</sup> Practice is, however, often less clear-cut than the emic ideology of “heterosexualized” desire suggests. Particularly in Kinshasa, for instance, several *fioto* men and boys allegedly have sex with each other rather than with their “normal” lovers. This supposedly “new trend” of intra-*fioto* relationships profoundly undermines the gendered dynamics of desire presented in this article. *Fioto* men and boys themselves claim that this practice is the result of the “excessive” financial demands they often face in relationships with “normal” boyfriends. Fieldwork indeed suggests that such intra-*fioto* relationships recalibrate the unidirectional flow of money and gifts towards a more or less reciprocal transactionality. Another trend that equally defies the heterosexualization of same-sex desire in Kinshasa – and, to a lesser extent, in Kisangani – are sexual relations between so-called “real” men who define themselves as “modern” (and sometimes “gay”) men and often express a “disgust” of their *fioto* sisters whom are apparently unable to disconnect their desire for being penetrated from visibly effeminacy.

<sup>19</sup> Another name used to refer to a supposedly “masculine” man who sometimes enjoys taking a passive role in same-sex relationships is *mari bongola* (literally a husband who “turns”, “flips” or “transforms”).

<sup>20</sup> Subscriber Identification Module

<sup>21</sup> In everyday speech, “hypocrite” individuals are also said to have “two hearts” (*na mitema mibale*). The expression of having a double SIM card obviously refers to this broader expression of having two hearts but adds to it distinctive sexual connotations.

<sup>22</sup> Their desires for women and girls are sometimes assumed to be *always* stronger than their desires for *fioto* men and boys. From a *fioto* perspective, they indeed *have to be* in order for them to remain “normal” men instead of secretly possessing a double SIM card.

<sup>23</sup> This urge, when it leads to the “habit” of repetitive passive anal intercourse, is even supposed to make their penises shrink to ultimately useless members and thus literally diminish and destroy their masculinity.

<sup>24</sup> Note the *cross* relation between desire and network: *fioto* desire captures the “normal”/male network while “normal” desire captures the *fioto*/female network.

<sup>25</sup> The conceptualization of desire as SIM cards also suggests that, at least in theory, one can change SIM cards over time. This resonates with the widespread understanding that many men and boys get “initiated” into the homoerotic economy as passive partners of usually older and more experienced men and boys, only to promote to an active “normal” position later on. In many cases, however, suspicions often remain that these men and boys have not “really” replaced their *fioto* SIM cards but just added a second “normal” one.

<sup>26</sup> A similar effect comes into play when men are openly desired or “hunted” by women and girls. This manifestation of active female desire also undermines male “activity” and is often ideologically framed as the untamed voracity of *kindumba* (sex-for-money). However, while decent women show restraint in expressing their desires, *fioto* desire is – by its very nature – assumed to be untamable.